

## Sleeping in a Living Sea of Waking Dreams

John Clare stared through a window of the mind that few poets ever openly admitted to looking through, exposing a side of his genius and reality that is dark and sinister. His well-known delirium is rife throughout his poem “I am,” and because of that, it proves itself to be one of his most intriguing poems published posthumously. Written while Clare was a patient at the Northampton General Asylum sometime between 1842-1846, it is a literary work of art as well as the sad confessions of a man so lost in depression and insanity that he belittles his own existence. While there are many influences behind the composition of “I am” and his other asylum works, it seems as though the influence of Clare’s sleeping habits have been overlooked. Clare references aspects of sleep only twice throughout, “I am,” but they are at the core of the only two sentences that make up the poem.

Many aspects of his personal life are considered critical in interpreting his poetry including his alcoholism, the guilt from his infidelity to his wife, his obsession with Mary Joyce and other lovers (some completely fabricated), and the shame he felt from his decline in social and literary popularity. Yet it seems that critics pay a significant amount of attention to the influence that only love had on Clare. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield argue that for Clare, “the power of love is raised to a higher order...” particularly that “he always valued love because it sharpened and enriched his vision” (138). While it is undeniable that understanding the role that love plays in Clare’s life is an integral part of discerning his works, it cannot be assumed that it “sharpened and enriched his vision.” On the contrary to this belief, in 1832, a full 10 years before Clare commits himself to High Beech, Clare complained to Dr. Darling (a well known physician of the period, who also dealt with Keats) that, “I cannot sleep for I am asleep as it were with my eyes open & I feel chills come over me & a sort of nightmare awake... I cannot keep my mind right as it were for I wish to read & cannot...” (qtd. Burwick 208). Frederick Burwick uses this quotation as an argument that Clare “could no longer concentrate” (208). If love is such a sharpening tool for Clare’s concentration as Robinson and Summerfield claim, then why does he struggle to do so as Burwick suggests?

As love shapes the subject of many of Clare’s poems, “I am” is not about love and lovers lost. Indeed, Clare touches on what he may “love the best” (11) (and if that were to be interpreted as a person, could easily be identified as Mary Joyce, his childhood sweet heart he refers to in many letters and poems), but it seems to focus on his lack of sleep, a cynical

reflection of his entire life, and the agonies that he deals with, rather than a lament of heartbreak. In the poem, the speaker says, “even the dearest that I love best / are strange...” (11-12). Clare’s use of the word “are” is indicative of a plural subject, the subject being whatever it is he refers to loving. It is unclear what Clare is referencing as the subject, but what is clear is that it has the possibility of representing multiple things. Limiting this poem to the singularity of a failed relationship limits the understanding of Clare’s mental capacity, insane or not.

While his love life is commonly seen as one of the most influential losses to Clare, it is hardly the most substantial influence that led to his composition of “I am.” This becomes obvious when the speaker addresses his “lifes esteems” as a “vast shipwreck” (10). Notice, he does not say the ruin of his life is his dearest Mary, Martha, or Patty, nor does he linger on the questions of “what if” and “why” which so commonly saturate poems of romantic turmoil. Instead, the speaker dwells on all the great losses that he faced in his life and how they represent ultimate destruction. Gary Harrison acknowledges that, in poems prior to “I am,” Clare focuses largely on love as “lost objects from the past,” but as his psychological state continued to regress, he uses “a new strategy: the projections of fulfillment onto an ideal...rather than turn his desire toward Mary [Joyce], who has been so long associated with [his] past,” (469-70). “I am” encompasses all aspects of Clare’s life, including his constant theme of love, but his ideal, that of a good night’s sleep, is at the core.

There are multiple instances when critics of Clare vaguely mention his sleeping habits, lending knowledge that they were indeed irregular, but it seems they never fully recognize the role they might play in his mental stability and as an influence of his work. One example is Geoffrey Grigson’s reference to Clare’s obsession with writing and how it was a factor in the progression of his psychological regression. Grigson uses a letter written to Clare’s publisher by the man “who introduced Clare to London and his fame,” Edward Drury. In it, Drury states that Clare experienced a “fever that oppresses him after a tremendous fit of rhyming” and that Clare would write “for three days and three nights, without hardly eating or sleeping” (qtd. Grigson 2). Grigson goes on to list multiple “aggravations” to Clare’s distress (3), but never once does he acknowledge the significance of Clare hardly sleeping.

Another example is when Burwick references the same letter in analyzing Clare’s drinking habits in relation to his insanity, almost the exact same passage, but completely omits the fact that he would have insomnia for nights on end (205). As stated earlier, Burwick made the argument that Clare lacked concentration as he referenced a letter Clare had written to Dr. Darling, and claimed it was due to a recent move Clare and his family had made (208). Like he ignores Clare’s sleeping patterns in the letter from Drury, Burwick completely overlooks the same fact in the previously quoted letter to Dr. Darling, in which the ignored part of the quote reads: “I cannot sleep for I am asleep as it were with my eyes open & I feel chills come over me & a sort of nightmare awake” (qtd. Burwick 208). This

undoubtedly foreshadows the idea of Clare's "waking dreams" (8) in "I am." Nightmares involve extreme terror and anxiety, and upon waking, one has the possibility of feeling those anxieties for minutes, hours, or days following. The last thing anyone would want to experience is a living nightmare, and essentially that is what happens to Clare through the description of his terrible sleeping patterns.

In more recent years, with the increasing awareness of psychological disorders and their origins, studies have been done that potentially connect the symptoms of anxiety, depression, and sleep deprivation, namely insomnia. It is also known that people who suffer from psychological disorders that include these symptoms sleep mostly during the REM phase, if they sleep at all. Sleep merits further explanation and understanding to fully connect all the complex themes that this poem offers, but before one can really comprehend how sleep, or lack thereof affected Clare's life and the composition of "I am," one must understand the implications that sleep creates on mental stability and health.

There are five phases of the sleeping process. The first four phases are classified as Non-REM (NREM), while the fifth and final phase is REM (rapid eye movement). It was commonly believed that one only dreamt during the REM phase, but from advancement of technology and further developments in the understanding of the human mind, it is now known that humans have the capability of dreaming during any phase. Interestingly enough, only the REM phase causes the most elevated activity of the brain, outside that of the activity during consciousness. Essentially, your brain is awake during REM sleep, so if one dreams mostly in this phase, they are going to wake up with a feeling that they received no rest at all.

What is the significance of REM sleep and dreams? During this phase, while you dream (even if you do not remember it upon waking), your body is rehashing, specifically, all the anxieties and stresses of the day. In short, this phase is our brain's natural way of ridding itself subconsciously of stress and anxiety that it has experienced consciously. To better understand the implications REM sleep has on one's mental health, the analysis of a study done in 2010 to show the "Impact of REM sleep on distortions of self-concept, mood and memory in depressed/anxious participants" (McNamara et al. 1) should be considered. Taking 35 healthy college students and 20 that are depressed/anxious students, doctors awoke them in the middle of the REM phase. This study resulted in the idea that REM sleep exacerbates and progresses the "cognitive distortions of anxious depression [which] feature a barrage of negative self-appraisals that lead to feelings of hopelessness and/or pessimism, guilt, worthlessness and/or thoughts of suicide" (McNamara et al. 1). Another revealing result in the study was that unfavorable memories were provoked considerably more often when both participants were aroused from REM sleep compared to their arousal of NREM sleep (McNamara et al. 1). While both groups experienced similar reactions to some aspects of the study, only depressed/anxious subjects dealt with negative evaluations of their "dream self" and their "REM sleep dreams were associated with greater frequencies of negative

emotion, greater aggression and victimization rates than dreams in NREM sleep for depressed/anxious participants” (McNamara et al. 1). Clare was known to have some type of anxious depression, leading ultimately to his insanity. The idea that REM sleep aggravates those anxious and depressing symptoms of worthlessness and pessimism described in “I am,” relates largely to the idea that his sleeping habits affected his thoughts intensely.

Robinson and Summerfield state that Clare’s emotional portrayal in his asylum poems is that “of isolation” and “abandonment” (136), both having the potential to cause depressing emotions. These despairing feelings are the anxieties that Clare expresses in the first two lines of “I am.” If he is thinking about those things while he is awake and dreams about them while he sleeps, he cannot escape them. Clare does not experience a normal sleep cycle that refreshes the mind, clarifies one’s thoughts, and relieves the body of those anxious and depressive tensions. His desire to once again experience a normal sleeping cycle in the last stanza of “I am,” is contrasted by the terrible feelings of depression he exhibits in the first two stanzas of the poem.

With the opening line of the poem, it becomes clear that it is one of deep melancholy; “I am – yet what I am, none cares or knows” (1). Clare’s use of the word “what” in describing the speaker implies that whatever the speaker may be is insignificant, as the phrase “none cares or knows” emits a negative connotation. The speaker ultimately realizes a distinct rift between himself and everyone else as well as their indifference toward his situation, emphasizing the worthlessness and bitterness he feels. The feeling of bitterness bleeds into line 2 and turns into resentment as the speaker says that his “friends forsake [him] like a memory lost.” His hopelessness then becomes apparent; if his friends, some of the most important people in one’s life, have deserted him, who is left for him to turn to? Through these two lines, the speaker presents the motif of contradiction through the idea that he simultaneously exists yet ceases to exist; he exists because he is what he is, a memory, even if “none cares or know”; but through the alienation of those who exude apathy towards his existence, and the desertion of the memory he represents to his friends, he is nothing. Even if he was hated, he would at least be thought of, but if “none cares or know[s]” then he runs through no one’s mind but his own.

As the speaker realizes and reflects this fact, he becomes “the self-consumer of [his] woes” (3). These woes are the pains of being forgotten and abandoned, and not only does he feel them, he is unable to forget them. The OED defines “woe” as an “exaggerated lament”, and a “lament” is defined as “a passionate or demonstrative expression of grief.” If the speaker is demonstrating an exaggerated expression of grief, then his demonstration of this grief is a parallel to the conscious thought and production of them. While he is producing these woes, he is also self-consuming them. To consume something is to destroy it, or be rid of it by means of absorption. Considering that the speaker is a “self-consumer,” Clare’s addition of the word “self” to “consumer” creates the implication that the speaker only makes them more rampant in his thoughts as he devours them within his own being.

He tries to get rid of these woes by continually analyzing where and how they came about. By doing that, he unknowingly engrains them into his conscious thoughts and into the deep subconscious thoughts that present themselves in multiple ways, including dreams.

The speaker's laments of life "rise and vanish in oblivions host" (4). It seems that the speaker refers to himself as "oblivions host" in the sense that oblivion holds the definition of "the state or condition of being forgotten" (OED 2a). A "host" in modern times is seen as a place of lodging, which has multiple implications; a host could be seen as a person offering their home as a place of gathering; or some living creature, whether it be a human, animal, or insect, that carries an infection, disease, or ailment. In the sense that Clare uses it though, "host" represents a "victim of sacrifice" (OED n.4). Through these specific word choices, Clare insinuates the speaker as someone who unjustly suffers at the hands of forgetfulness, and the worries brought on by that injustice constantly present and subdue themselves through the speaker's conscious and subconscious mind.

Even as the speaker is sacrificed and destroyed at the cost of forget and apathy, he says: "And yet I am, and live – like vapours tost / Into the nothingness of scorn and noise" (7-6). Here the idea of existing and ceasing to exist presents itself yet again. Even after he views himself as a sacrifice, the speaker still lives in the "nothingness of scorn and noise." "Nothingness" is the equivalent of nonexistence, but the presence of "scorn and noise" implicates that the "nothingness" is still in reality. This further alludes to the idea of dual realities the speaker seems to be simultaneously apart of.

The "nothingness of scorn and noise" is equated to "the living sea of waking dreams, / Where there is neither sense of life or joys, / But the vast shipwreck of my lifes esteems" (8-10). Considering that up to this point, we are still in the analysis of one sentence, everything becomes connected on another level. The speaker's idea of existing and ceasing to exist from the apathy and forget of those who mattered most in his life, has led him to dwell continuously on the problems that built up to that apathy and forget. This has become his reality, the constant anxiety of worrying where his life went wrong. His reality is represented through the "living sea." It is a living sea, because it is the view that life is a colossal thing, like the ocean. It is something so majestic and sublime, and holds more meaning than anyone can even begin to fathom. Yet, for the speaker, this life is the reality of his "waking dreams." His worry has manifested itself not only in his conscious thoughts while he is awake, but in the thoughts of his subconscious that seemingly express themselves through his dreams. These subconscious expressions have "neither sense of life or joys," so they have only death and unhappiness. This is the reflection of the speaker viewing his "lifes esteems" as a "vast shipwreck." A shipwreck is ultimate destruction to a vessel, which poses the possibility of killing those on board. This references the idea of "neither sense of life or joys" and the destruction of his own life, to the point that it cannot be repaired, and this idea envelopes why he views himself as forgotten and worthless.

Through this dual reality of the speaker existing to himself but to no one else, the

idea that his life is symbolic of ultimate destruction, and the fact that he has to experience both his conscious and subconscious anxieties as “waking dreams” (8), Clare describes his own internal misery of the singular reality he endures by living through the nightmares of his sleep, and dreaming of the anxieties in his life. The dreams of the speaker reflect those of Clare’s, further proving that, even while Clare slept, he gained zero relief from his anxieties that he faced while he was awake.

While the first sentence of the poem is extremely bleak and depressing, the second sentence and last stanza of the poem present the hope that Clare had to one day sleep peacefully again. The speaker states: “I long for scenes where man hath never trod / A place where woman never smiled or wept” (13-14). As the speaker desires a place where no man has ever been, one might possibly assume heaven or an afterlife of sorts, but if it were the case that there is a heaven or an afterlife, then those who have died before the speaker would be there already. Here is also an instance where love actually does play a particular role in “I am.” If it were also a place where no woman exists, then it would not be tainted with the joys and sorrows of experiencing love. Through these ideas of zero human existence, it seems that the speaker desires to dream of things that no person could have an influence on, not an afterlife.

While he wants to “abide with [his] Creator God” (15) insinuating the possibility for a desire of an afterlife, the speaker states he wants to “sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept” (16). By wrapping the idea of submitting to God around the deeper desire to sleep soundly as he did when he was a child, implies that his devotion to God through the innocence of childhood is what gave him a good night’s rest. Childhood is rarely riddled with deep anxiety and worries. It is lived day-to-day in an utter carefree state of mind. While there may be an occasional occurrence of a nightmare, it is hardly the case that as a child, one experiences serious bouts of insomnia and dreams of the anxieties they’ve faced in their life. This idea contrasts deeply with the previous idea of experiencing the anxieties of life not only while the speaker is awake, but also while he sleeps.

The poem ends with the speaker expressing that through his sound sleep he would be “untroubling and untroubled where [he] lie[s] / the grass below, above, the vaulted sky” (17-18). Through the use of the word “untroubling” the speaker clearly views himself as a nuisance, and desires to be worried about by no one. He also describes the sleep as “untroubled,” which would indicate that it would no longer be the “waking dreams” of the troubles in his life that he experiences day in and day out. The last line creates the notion that he possibly desires to be dead, as a “vaulted sky” insinuates a tomb, as described before, an afterlife creates the possibility of other inhabitants. The speaker clearly states that he wanted a place no one has ever been, and the only possibility left is that of his dreams.

Through “I am”, Clare expresses his internal desire to experience the comforts of sleeping soundly. As his psychosis progressed, it became increasingly apparent and yet was ignored, that insomnia and interrupted sleeping habits were a serious problem for Clare. He

expressed it in letters, and even others noticed the problems he faced. Still, it was never considered as a serious influence in his work even as it was a serious influence in his life. The anxieties he faced daily as well as the idea that his life amounted to nothing is evident in “I am,” and therefore “I am” proves itself to be one of the most revealing works of his asylum years into the deep thoughts of his conscious and subconscious mind.

It is often encouraged that the reader recognize the speaker of the poem separately from the author, but at the point in his life when he composed this poem, he was already well aware of his own psychological state. In the context that this was written, I believe it imperative to view the speaker as Clare himself, more specifically, the most inner thoughts of Clare’s psyche. This view creates a heavy, solemn tone, expressing his deeply disturbed beliefs. It has been suggested that his asylum poems present clarity to his thoughts that he could not present through any other form of communication, as Dr. Matthew Allen, Clare’s doctor at Epping Forest, writes:

Ever since he came, and even now at almost all times, the moment he gets pen or pencil in hand he begins to write most beautiful poetic effusions. Yet he has never been able to maintain in conversation, nor even in writing prose, the appearance of sanity for two minutes or two lines together, and yet there is no indication whatever of insanity in any of his poetry. (qtd. Grigson 6-7)

From Dr. Allen’s analysis, it becomes obvious that as Clare eloquently describes his inner turmoil, what he conveys through “I am” and his other asylum works are the most fluid thoughts that he has been able to successfully communicate, not only to the reader and his doctors, but also to himself. Although Clare was a patient in a mental asylum, these writings are subsequently what the author himself believes to be true, and not just thoughts he has pondered the validity of and written down. It is not only that he communicates more clearly through writing, but it is through “poetic effusions,” not by “writing prose.” Dr. Allen’s observation declares the significance of Clare’s inability to express his thoughts through any other means except through that of his poetry, and this subsequently justifies the idea that Clare was more himself in his poems than he was at any other moment during his institution.

If these poems represent the true Clare, a man who not only struggled with lost love, alcoholism, and infidelity, but also torment, anxiety, and misery that saturated both his conscious thoughts as well as his subconscious thoughts, then through the revealing nature of “I am,” it becomes obvious that sleep meant more to him than most critics realize. It is ultimately a driving force as an influence in the progression of his psychosis as well as an influence in the composition of many of his asylum works, namely “I am.”

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## I Am – John Clare

I am: yet what I am none cares or knows,  
My friends forsake me like a memory lost;  
I am the self-consumer of my woes,  
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,  
Like shades in love and death's oblivion lost;  
And yet I am! and live with shadows tost

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,  
Into the living sea of waking dreams,  
Where there is neither sense of life nor joys,  
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;  
And e'en the dearest--that I loved the best--  
Are strange--nay, rather stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man has never trod;  
A place where woman never smil'd or wept;  
There to abide with my creator, God,  
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept:  
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie;  
The grass below--above the vaulted sky.